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Media Monitor

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Exit Reagan . . . Enter Bush

TV News Coverage of the Presidential Transition

Has George Bush enjoyed a media honeymoon since election day? To find out, we examined nearly eight hours of Presidential transition coverage in the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news between the election and the inauguration (November 9 through January 19). This month's *Media Monitor* compares coverage of the incoming Bush administration with earlier newtwork coverage of candidate Bush.

Major Findings

- **A Kinder, Gentler Media** - During the general election, evaluations of Bush on TV news were 2 to 1 negative. During the transition, evaluations were 2 to 1 positive. But most non-partisan sources remained critical of Bush. *Page 3*

- **The New George Bush** - Comments on Bush's campaign were 89% negative, but judgments of his actions as President-elect were 94% positive, and predictions about his presidency were 65% positive. *Page 3*

- **Bush vs. Brokaw?** - Bush's press was 80% positive on CBS and 68% positive on ABC, but only 48% positive on NBC. *Page 3*

- **A New Dan Quayle?** - Quayle's press was nearly as good as Bush's (62% positive), and even better than Bush's among non-partisan sources. *Page 4*

- **Reagan's Mixed Reviews** - Bad press outweighed good press on President Reagan by 52% to 48%, including a 2 to 1 negative margin among non-partisan sources.

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Transition Coverage

We monitored all stories on the Presidential transition that appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news between the election and the inauguration (November 9 to January 19). The coverage totalled 277 stories lasting nearly eight hours (474 minutes). ABC led the coverage with 103 stories and 161 minutes. NBC was next in airtime with 134 minutes across 81 stories, while CBS aired 93 stories that lasted 119 minutes.

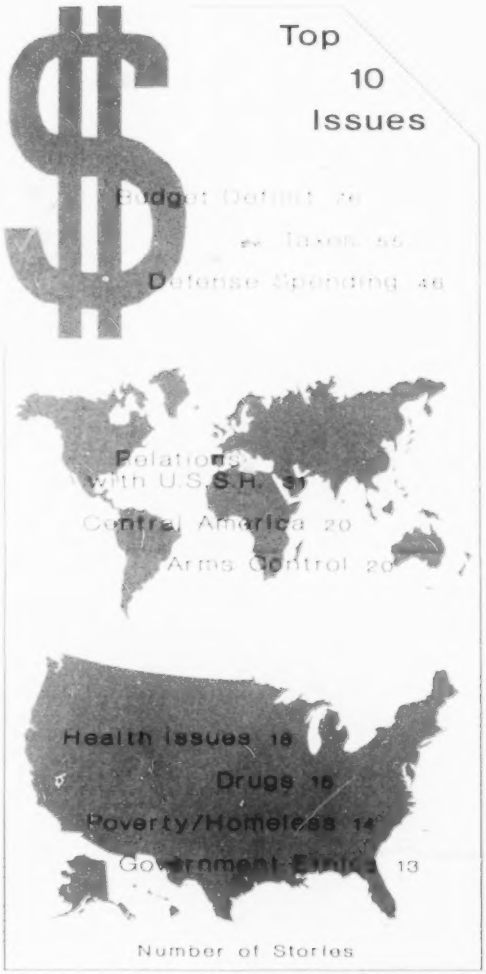
(Bush's) biggest problem - Quayle as Vice President...A veteran Republican operative described Quayle as 'emotionally immature, with a short attention span...'

-Tom Brokaw
NBC, 11/9

The Issue Agenda

What a difference election day makes. During two and one half months of general election coverage, crime was the top issue raised on the nightly network newscasts. The topic of 142 election stories from late August to early November, crime was mentioned in only five stories on the transition, during a similar time period. Conversely, the top-rated policy issue during the transition was the budget deficit, which barely made the top ten list during the campaign.

Issue coverage during the transition generally reflected the potential for future controversy more than current policy concerns. The exception to this trend was the budget deficit. It generated by far the heaviest coverage, as a source of both immediate concern and future contention. The deficit was portrayed as an issue that would test Bush's relations with the Democratic Congress, as well as his abilities as a manager.



Economic issues dominated early coverage of the incoming administration's policy debate, as stories on taxes ran second only to coverage of the deficit. Other economic issues were usually covered in relation to the deficit. The question of how Bush could balance the budget without raising taxes popped up frequently, along with Bush's "read my lips" sound bite on tax increases. The only major event-driven issue coverage came from Soviet leader Gorbachev's visit to New York and U.S. recognition of the PLO in December. These events boosted coverage of US-Soviet relations and Middle East policies, respectively.

Labels

During the 1988 campaign, candidate George Bush was labelled ideologically 20 times on the network evening news--15 times as conservative, 3 times as moderate, and twice as liberal. That's three times as many conservative as non-conservative labels overall. Since the election, though, he has been termed moderate once, "pragmatic" twice (this term was not included in our other totals), and conservative not at all.

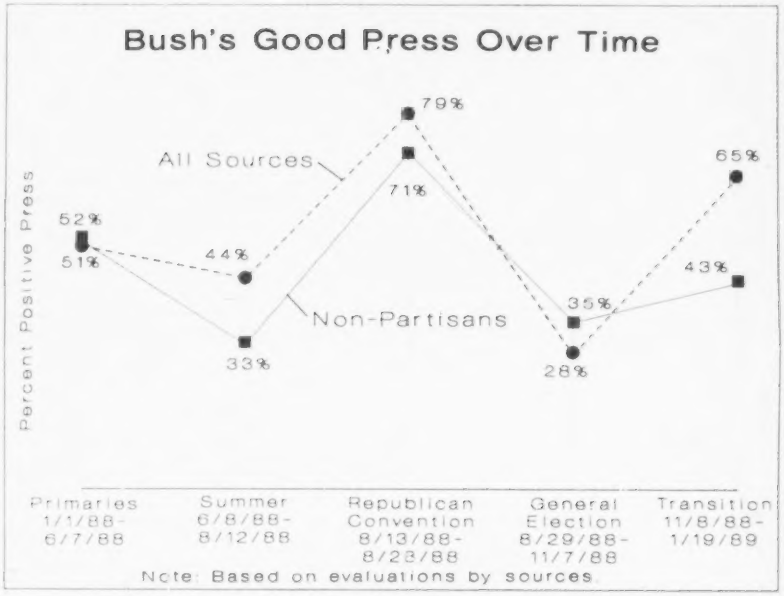
Overall, labels of the new administration have been about evenly divided. We counted two "liberal" tags, eight "moderates," and 11 "conservatives." Reporters themselves accounted for two-thirds of these, splitting 14 moderate and conservative labels. The unexpected "liberals" were Jack Kemp (so labelled by an NAACP official) and OMB chief Darman. "Moderate" labels were spread among Darman, Brady, Baker, Thornburgh, and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft.

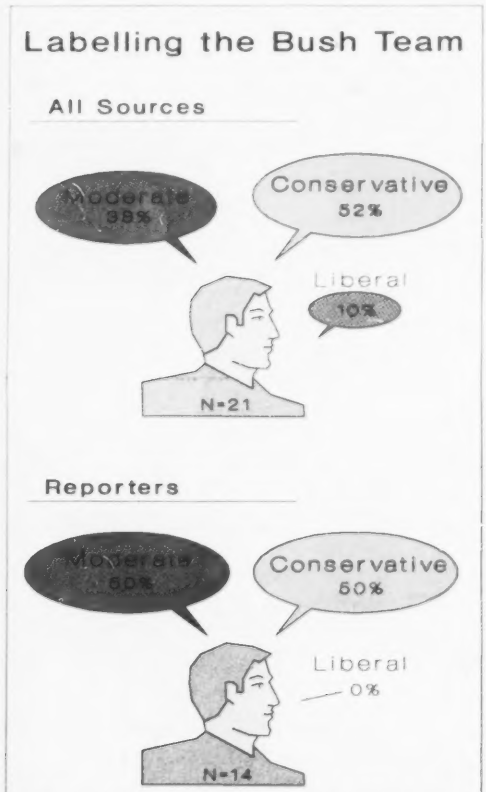
John Sununu emerged as the appointee most frequently labelled a conservative. He accounted for 7 of the 11 labels, including the only two labels suggesting membership in the far right (Sample: On November 17, Dan Rather called Sununu "a champion of the hard right."). Others labelled as conservative included Dan Quayle, Elizabeth Dole, and William Bennett.

Media Honeymoon?

The networks jeered Bush as a suitor but cheered him as a groom. During the general election, over two out of three sources (72%) on the evening news turned thumbs down on Bush. During the transition, this trend was reversed, as nearly two out of three sources (65%) approved of the President-elect.

This turnabout continues the history of volatility in Bush's TV news coverage. Throughout the primary campaign, source judgments split about evenly on candidate Bush (51% positive to 49% negative). During summer 1988, prior to the Republican convention, his bad press outweighed the good by 56% to 44%. Then the traditional convention boost was heightened by journalists' discovery of the "new" non-wimpy George Bush. For two weeks during and after the convention Bush enjoyed the longest sustained burst of positive coverage we have recorded for him - nearly 4 to 1 good over bad press (79% to 21%). As quickly as this wave built, however, it crested and broke. During the general election Bush's coverage was consistently negative reaching a margin of 72% negative to 28% positive from Labor Day to election day.





Mr. Reagan got off to a bad start and ended badly.

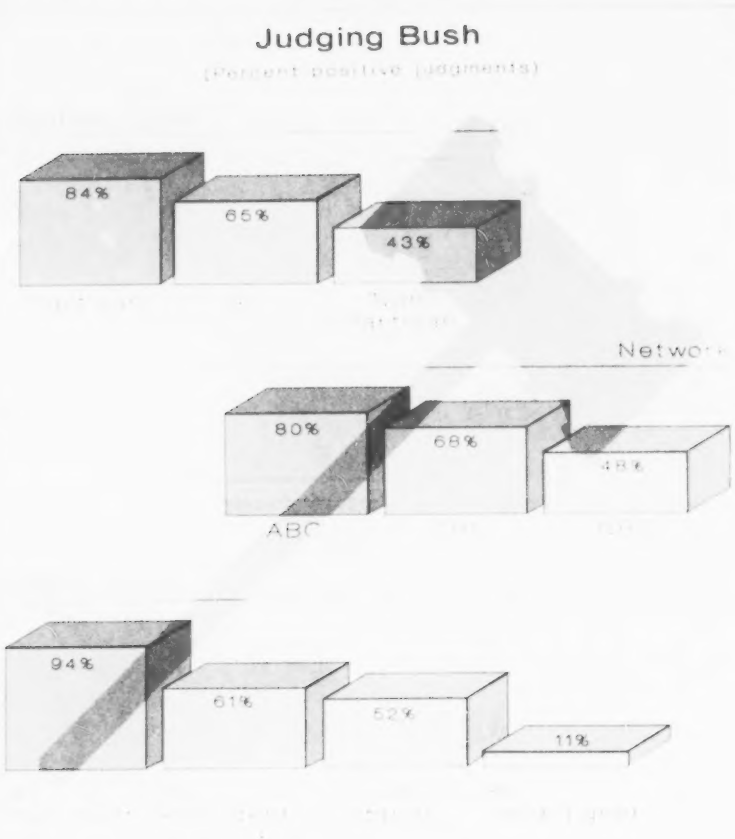
-Vernon Jordan
Urban League
ABC, 1/14

All in all, not bad at all.

-Ronald Reagan
ABC, 1/12

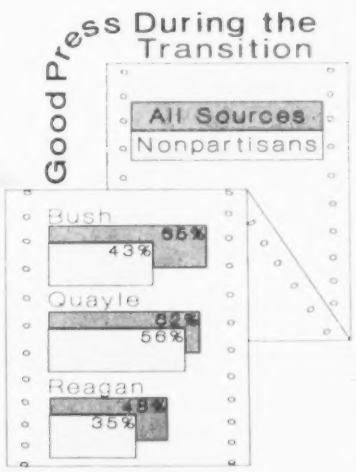
So the President-elect's "honeymoon" was just the latest surge in the ebb and flow of his media image. During the transition, there were wide variations in his coverage across networks, aspects of his performance, and the type of source being cited. During the campaign, the three networks each gave Bush roughly the same proportion of good and bad press. During the transition, NBC was significantly more critical than the other two. ABC and CBS did give Bush a real honeymoon, with 80% and 68% positive coverage, respectively. On NBC, by contrast, bad press slightly outweighed good press, by 52% to 48%.

Bush was praised for his performance since the election, even as criticism lingered over his campaign tactics. Comments on his actions as President-elect were 94% positive, while evaluations of his campaign were 89% negative (all calculations exclude neutral or mixed judgments, so positive and negative judgments add to 100%). Predictions of his likely performance as President were mainly positive, by 61% to 39%. But evaluations of his stands on policy issues were about evenly divided (52% positive vs. 48% negative).



Finally, Bush fared better among partisan sources (those identified as Democrats or Republicans) than among non-partisans (all others). His ratings by partisans were 84% positive; among non-partisans, only 43%. This gives an important clue to the nature and limitations of his "honeymoon." The preponderance of good press resulted from the new administration's domination of the public stage and the muting of criticism by the opposition party. For example, on November 18, NBC aired House Speaker Jim Wright's positive assessment: "He (Bush) chose to come see me, that was wonderful. I thought it was a good sign. He showed by doing that, that he is willing to come half-way." Meanwhile, non-partisan sources (including reporters) were hardly more positive during the transition than they were during the general election (43% vs. 35%).

Thus, Bush's media honeymoon seemed an effect of his political honeymoon, rather than a cause of it. This follows the pattern scholars have observed in the past. Ronald Reagan received harsh TV news coverage during the 1980 campaign, very positive coverage immediately after his election, and sharply critical coverage after he took office. Though he left office with the highest approval rating (64%) of any President in the age of scientific polling, Reagan still received more bad press than good, by 52% to 48%, during his final days in the White House. Among nonpartisan sources, his negative evaluations outweighed positive ones by nearly 2 to 1 (65% to 35%).



In fact, several of Bush's positive evaluations were also backhanded swipes at Reagan. Sample: NBC's Andrea Mitchell (11/30) reported Jesse Jackson's statement that "the President-elect showed an openness and willingness to listen; something he did not find in Ronald Reagan."

The greatest beneficiary of the transition honeymoon may have been Dan Quayle, who leaped from only 34% good press during the campaign (worse that any other candidate except for Gary Hart) to 62% since November, including 56% among nonpartisan sources.

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The New George Bush

Often defensive and testy during the election campaign, the new Bush is confident, spontaneous, good natured and very much in charge.

-Andrea Mitchell
NBC, 11/27

If President-elect George Bush gets any better at this healing process, they may have to add the title "doctor" to his name.

-Tom Brokaw
NBC, 11/30